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STATEMENT BY SIR LEON BRITTAN
VICE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

TO THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, WASHINGTON

NEWSMAKER PRESS CONFERENCE: Wednesday Jan 16 at 09.00

World events in the last two years have certainly thrown a spotlight on Europe's capacity to act together in the areas of foreign policy and defence. You in the United States have been watching, I know, with a mixture of hope and scepticism. The invasion of Kuwait and threat of war in the Gulf, and the turbulence in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are posing challenges to us which have underlined our strengths and our weaknesses.

Do not underestimate the extent to which the European Community has responded to these challenges. The EC has reacted in a way which would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. It is clear that we must develop our policy-making procedures further, but Europe is becoming a respected player in world affairs and a valid partner to the United States.

Let me take the situation in the Gulf. After the Iraqi invasion the Community acted rapidly and efficiently in applying sanctions. Even before the United Nations had formally introduced sanctions, legislation had been adopted, applicable in all EC countries, which was binding on all citizens and companies and ensured full compliance. The Community had the legal mechanisms to act and act we did.

If the response at the political and security level has been more diffuse, it is because the Community only has limited powers in these areas. The Community's rules do not provide any sort of mechanism for defence coordination, let alone military intervention, which has been regarded as a responsibility of NATO in the European theatre. However, the 12 member countries of the Community have pursued a consistent line by unequivocally supporting the United Nations resolutions and putting all possible diplomatic pressure on Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait. A major European effort has gone into resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees displaced as a result of the invasion and substantial humanitarian aid given through the EC budget.

I am not claiming unanimity on all points. War and the threat of war pose the hardest decisions of all - as relations between your President and Congress make clear - but the 12 have maintained their solidarity.

This is one of the problems which is being examined in the Community's conference on political union which is currently under way. The Community is seeking ways of better coordinating foreign policy and of taking the decisions which flow from this policy. Defence aspects will also be examined to see how far we can go, at least in the direction of working more closely together and in areas such as defence procurement.

The chaos in the Soviet Union and the turbulent aftershocks of the collapse of communism in eastern Europe pose different problems, primarily of a political and economic kind. The United States has borne much of the burden of responding to Mr Saddam; it is the European Community which must bear the main burden for guiding eastern Europe into calmer waters.

This role has been acknowledged by the Group of 24 and is one which we take extremely seriously. It means providing economic aid and investment, encouraging trade and providing the political support which will be essential as these countries transform their societies so they come to be based on individual freedom, pluralist democracy and the market economy.

The turbulence in the Soviet Union is a deeply disturbing phenomenon, a social and economic collapse of frightening proportions. Again, the Community is intensely relevant. It can assist through trade and aid, and can deliver what it promises in economic terms, but it will only do so if it is clear that the Soviet Union is not turning to systematic repression and a misguided and unacceptable way of handling its problems with the Baltic states and other nationalities.

The challenge now is to design a new architecture for Europe which will provide a stable economic and political framework, no doubt including the accession of new member countries. The Community must be the lead architect.

As well as the intergovernmental conference on political union, which should make Europe better able to react to world events and indeed to shape them, we are also discussing progress towards economic and monetary union. This has as its object the creation of a single currency with an independent Eurofed and will be a further step in strengthening the Community's economy and its political unity.

The Community, then, is not static but dynamic. It is being tested and changed by events and I have no doubt that it can adapt and strengthen its own capacity for action in partnership with friends and allies. The academic who described the collapse of communism as the end of history was somewhat premature; in fact it has opened a Pandora's box, unleashing a whirlwind of events to which Europe must be able to respond confidently and effectively.